



## Perlman, Jim, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (Second Revised Edition) [review]

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The result is a groundbreaking study, remarkable not least for its capacity to fuse highly original historical research with new textual interpretations of an interesting kind.

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M. WYNN THOMAS

JIM PERLMAN, ED FOLSOM, AND DAN CAMPION, eds. *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. Second Revised Edition. Duluth, Minnesota: Holy Cow! Press, 1998.

Greeting the publication of the first edition of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1981) were more than thirty reviews, all favorable, some of them rhapsodic in their praise. Revised and expanded, the second edition is an even better book and should be just as warmly embraced. Featured in the new *Measure* is a collection of poems, letters, and impressionistic essays by both American poets and poets from abroad. In all, there are 108 responses—non-academic responses—to Whitman's life and writings. They are presented chronologically and range from transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous letter to Whitman (dated July 21, 1855) to a 1996 poem by Rudolfo Anaya, "poet of the barrio." Collectively, the responses reflect what is now a long tradition of arguing with Whitman, a phenomenon described by the editors as "talking back" to the poet. In the end, the responses suggest that Whitman's most perceptive and thoughtful readers, by and large, have not been scholars and professional critics but other poets, other literary artists.

Not much that appeared in the first edition has been excluded from the second. Essays by C. W. Truesdale and Michael Kincaid have been dropped, along with poems by Paul Potts, Jonathan Williams, Anselm Hollo, and Robert Flanagan. In eliminating these contributions, the editors have not diminished the quality of the anthology. The best materials have been retained, and these include poems by Hamlin Garland (who sends Whitman "A Tribute of Grasses"); by Fernando Pessoa ("I burst loose to salute you, bounding, handstanding, yawping!"); by Federico Garcia Lorca, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Denise Levertov, and Philip Dacey; by Allen Ginsberg ("In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!"); and by Louis Simpson ("Where are you, Walt? / the Open Road goes to the used-car lot."). Such poems embody the strong avowals and impassioned dialogue that made the first, and now make the current, edition so remarkable.

Other outstanding materials that have been retained include essays by D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Pablo Neruda, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, Joseph Bruchac, Alvaro Cardona-Hine, June Jordan, Meridel LeSueur, and Robert Bly. All of these writers record discerning perceptions or make provocative declarations, but only a meager sampling of their thoughts can be provided here. Well worth noting are the views of Bruchac, who states that "Whitman's celebration of the earth and natural things, his precise namings, are very much like Native American song," or of LeSueur, who avers that "I cannot make it clear how much Whitman meant before World War I, in the grip of the white puritan, the Wasp, the Bible belt—the severe and terrible trashing of the

body. . . .” Also notable are the opinions, or pointed criticisms, of Bly, who has, by the way, retitled and substantially revised the essay he originally published in *Measure*. Bly complains that Whitman “doesn’t identify his immediate poetic and intellectual ancestors,” nor is he “frank about his limitations or about what one might call the amount of ‘lead,’ the unregenerate elements in a person, within his family and inside him.”

The new selections in the second edition of *Measure* include fourteen poems and eight essays. These additions are notable both for their pertinence, as they strikingly carry on the “conversation” highlighted by the first edition, and for their diversity, as they give greater representation to the voices of women and minorities. Morris Rosenfeld, Zona Gale, Sharon Olds, Yusef Komunyakaa, Chou Ping, Sherman Alexie, Willa Cather, Adrienne Rich, Robert Duncan, Marge Piercy, and Garrett Hongo are just some of the writers who now appear in the anthology.

Some of the new writers ask difficult questions of Whitman or express profound misgivings about his vision. In a poem entitled “Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce,” Jack Spicer directly addresses his literary forebear, saying “You did not ever understand cruelty. It was that that severed your world from me, fouled your moon and your ocean, threw me out of your bearded paradise. The comrade you are walking with suddenly twists your hand off.” In an essay entitled “Walt Whitman’s New World, Old World,” Gary Snyder bluntly states that anyone who carefully reads Whitman’s lengthy prose work *Democratic Vistas* will find “some key elements missing”:

Oddly enough, there is little grasp of the issues concerning wild nature, or concern for it, in Whitman’s rhetoric. He celebrates industry, workers, activities, and the relentless energy of Americans (who almost always are implicitly white workers and pioneers). Ultimately he finds nature either “healthy and happy” or “nothing in itself” and “serviceable.” Whitman is unexcelled in his attribution of a kind of divinity to ordinary men and women. However, the respect and authenticity he gives to human beings is not extended to nonhuman creatures.

Most of the writers (or selections) new to the second edition are intent on expressing agreement, paying homage, or acknowledging indebtedness. Thus they are far more affirmative in their responses than are either Spicer or Snyder. One positive response of particular interest comes from Alicia Ostriker, one of a number of women poets who have begun to address Whitman. In her essay “Loving Walt Whitman and the Problem of America” Ostriker declares that

. . . what moves me, and I suspect other American women poets, is less the agreeable programmatic utterances than the gestures whereby Whitman enacts the crossing of gender categories in his own person. It is not his claim to be “of the woman” that speeds us on our way but his capacity to be shamelessly receptive as well as active, to be expansive on an epic scale without a shred of nostalgia for narratives of conquest, to invent a rhetoric of power without authority, without hierarchy, and without violence.

Yet another important positive response is found in “Walt Whitman Strides the Llano of New Mexico,” a poem written expressly for *Measure* by Chicano poet Rudolfo Anaya. Near the end of this work Anaya declares “I woke to write

my *Leaves of Llano Grass*, the cuentos / of the llano, tierra sagrada! I thank the wise / teacher who said, 'Dark Child, read this book! / You are grass and to grass you shall return.'" Such statements are eloquent testimony to Whitman's ability to evoke reactions beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and race.

Contextualizing and explicating the more than one hundred poems and prose works in the new edition of *Measure* is a lengthy essay entitled "Talking Back to Walt Whitman: An Introduction." Written by Ed Folsom, this overview is two-thirds again as long as the one that opened the first edition. Indeed, the new introduction is so substantial that it nearly constitutes a short history of modern American poetry. Folsom seems aware that he is providing for his readers something comparable to a poetic history, for he says at one point that "one way to understand twentieth-century American poetry is as an ongoing and evolving discussion, debate, or argument with Walt Whitman." Some of the recent directions this "argument" has taken are indicated by certain titles of the subsections of Folsom's introduction: "Talking Back Across Race," "A Spanish-Speaking Whitman," "Chants Native American," and "Women's Responses."

Scattered throughout the book are a dozen and a half photographs of Whitman, some of which are seldom reproduced and therefore may be unfamiliar to readers. Concluding the anthology is a 35-page bibliography listing poems, essays, and books that in some essential way react to Whitman's life and work. Compiled by Ed Folsom and containing nearly 700 items, the bibliography is the most comprehensive of its kind.

The revised edition of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* is a truly outstanding compilation, made so by its well-chosen selections, illuminating introduction, extensive bibliography, and fascinating visuals. Of the many and various collections of brief critical assessments of the poet, *Measure* is arguably the best. It can be read and understood—and actually enjoyed!—by individuals both inside and outside of the field of Whitman studies.

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KEITH V. COMER. *Strange Meetings: Walt Whitman, Wilfred Owen, and Poetry of War*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, and Bromley, Kent, U.K.: Chartwell-Bratt, 1996.

Keith Comer casts a wide critical net in this illuminating book, and thereby manages to catch some unlikely combinations of thought: he relies on close reading of primary documents and demonstrates a concern for formal aesthetics, but he also manages to cite a host of poststructuralist critics, such as Cixous, Foucault, and Derrida. Consequently, he skillfully positions his argument in the cleft between formalism and other theories, thus potentially appealing to theoretically diverse audiences. The book also offers several layers of accessibility and thus will appeal to undergraduate, graduate, and professional readers (particularly in linguistics). There is a continual invocation of prominent Whitman and Owen scholars, as well as acknowledgment of a respectable list of historical/cultural studies in representational politics as applied to the discourse of war and poetics. Indeed, Comer offers us a respite from the territorial